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KOREAN AIRLINER BROKAW: Today, almost 10 months after Korean Airlines Incident Flight 007 was shot down by a Soviet jet fighter, the incident is again being debated. An article in the British magazine, Defence (sic) Attache, supports the Soviet version of the tragedy, with a new element. Fred Francis in Washington tonight with the latest.

FRANCIS: An article in the obscure, yet respected, British publication promotes the Soviet claim that the Korean airliner was on a spy mission. The new theory, which involves the space shuttle Challenger, is supported solely by the coincidence of the shuttle being in orbit at the time. The article states that the shuttle, a satellite and a surveillance aircraft were part of a coordinated intelligence mission. The Pentagon, the White House and the State Department denied the allegations.

JOHN\HUGHES (State Department spokesman): Such a suggestion is totally without foundation and seems to be following the Soviet propaganda line on that incident.

FRANCIS: The article's anonymous author says that the United States first sent an RC-135 spy plane into the area to see whether Soviet air defenses would begin to track the plane. Then, when the spy plane left the area, the Korean airliner continued on into Soviet airspace on what the author calls its spy mission. A U.S. spy satellite made three orbits to monitor the Soviet response, and the space shuttle was also nearby to record the Soviets' early communication with Moscow. The magazine's editor said there are too many coincidences. RUPERT\PENGELLY (editor, Defence Attache): The probability of the various coincidences that took place of the shuttle, uh, the satellite, uh, and the aircraft, the KAL aircraft, and also the RC-135 are mathematically calculable, and there, the odds against it are very low.

FRANCIS: An official here dismissed the charges as the stuff of a good spy novel, saying, 'We wouldn't use the shuttle for something so routine as listening to Soviet communications.' Fred Francis, NBC News, the State Department.